

## Ruby Dhalla's nanny trouble

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Brampton MP Ruby Dhalla faces accusations of mistreatment by two nannies. (LYLE STAFFORD FOR THE TORONTO STAR)

By DALE BRAZAO STAFF REPORTER

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Fast-rising Liberal MP Ruby Dhalla has become entangled in the nanny trap, with allegations two nannies hired to care for her mother were illegally employed and then mistreated.

The nannies also allege Dhalla improperly seized their passports and family members forced them to do non-nanny jobs such as washing cars, shining shoes and cleaning family-owned chiropractic clinics.

Magdalene Gordo, 31, and Richelyn Tongson, 37, say they were hired by Dhalla to work at the family home in Mississauga and routinely toiled five days a week, earning \$250 a week while working 12- to 16-hour days. The Dhalla family did not obtain the necessary federal approval under the Live-In Caregiver Program for the women to live and work in their home.

Ruby Dhalla said she is "shocked and appalled" by the allegations and never abused the nannies.

"Anyone who has ever worked in our home has been treated with a lot of love, with a lot of care and compassion and money has never, ever been withheld from anyone," Dhalla told the *Star* in an interview.

Dhalla, 35, is Liberal critic for youth and multiculturalism. The first Sikh woman in the Commons, she was first elected MP in 2004.

She's no stranger to controversy. A trip to India in January 2008 turned into a public relations nightmare after two children were beaten by police after an aide's purse was stolen. Dhalla was portrayed in the Indian media as uncaring about the children's fate. Later, Dhalla said she condemned violence of any kind.

Facing new allegations she mistreated nannies, Dhalla, in a statement released to the *Star* through a lawyer, said she has "no knowledge of the details

regarding the live-in caregivers for her family" and had "no involvement in the selection, interviewing, hiring, supervising, sponsoring or any financial transactions whatsoever with a live-in caregiver for my family."



The allegations surfaced two weeks ago at a public meeting where nannies told two Ontario cabinet ministers that placement agencies and employers are using the federal Live-In Caregiver Program to keep them enslaved.

The meeting was held by provincial Education Minister Kathleen Wynne and Labour Minister Peter Fonseca after a *Star* investigation exposed widespread abuse in a program that allows Canadians to hire foreign caregivers to look after children, the elderly or people with disabilities.

Prompted by Wynne to speak their minds, nanny Gordo stood up and accused Dhalla, MP for Brampton-Springdale, of holding her passport and refusing to pay her when she quit.

"Seeing (Wynne) up there asking us to be strong and stand up for our rights, I had a flash of what happened to me and I decided to speak out," said Gordo, adding she admitted to the politicians she worked "illegally" at the Dhalla household without a work permit.

The *Star* learned of the allegations and began its own probe.

The nannies were hired in early 2008 to care for Tavinder Dhalla, Ruby's mother. According to an application submitted to Service Canada for hiring the second nanny, Ruby's brother, Neil Dhalla, said Tavinder has "a disability which makes it difficult for her to walk and stand for long periods." Preliminary approval documents did not arrive until after the nanny quit.

Both nannies say Tavinder appeared quite healthy, but had a foot problem that required massaging late in the evening. They claimed that, beyond providing morning and nightly tea for Tavinder, most jobs were cleaning-related, either in the house, outside or in chiropractic clinics owned by the family.

Nanny advocates say these jobs fall outside the federal guidelines for caregivers hired under the program. "Her mother had had me shovelling snow at midnight," said Gordo. "She wanted a slave, not a caregiver."

Dhalla's mother could not be reached for comment.

Gordo and Tongson were sent to work at the Dhalla home by Akemi Taniguchi, who runs a placement agency from her tiny North York bungalow. Taniguchi said she dealt mainly with Ruby Dhalla and placed the women after the MP assured her she could expedite the necessary work permits.

"I was told that she could work on it right away because she's an MP," said Taniguchi.

Both nannies complained to her of being overworked and she advised them both to leave, Taniguchi said. A third nanny sent to work at the Dhalla residence quit within days, Taniguchi said.

Gordo was the first nanny hired, and said she worked for the Dhalla family for about three weeks, starting at 7:30 in the morning and working as late as midnight.

Gordo claimed she was taken three times to clean the apartment of a family cousin, and did other jobs unrelated to caring for the mother. She quit and alleges it took her more than a month to get paid. Gordo said she was only paid after getting help from Brampton businessman Khalid Alvi, who confirmed to the *Star* he intervened.

The next nanny, Richelyn Tongson, worked for the Dhalla family for more than three months. Tongson said she was ordered to clean two chiropractic clinics owned by Dhalla's brother, Neil, as well as clean the home of the same cousin. Both Neil and Ruby are chiropractors, but Ruby said she no longer has ownership in the family clinics.

Part of her daily routine, Tongson claims, was to shine five pairs of Neil's shoes, and de-lint his suits. "Neil Dhalla himself showed me how to do it," she said of her shoeshine training. "He said I make sure every morning his shoes are shiny before he goes to work." Her day started at 7:30 a.m. and usually ended at 11 p.m. She wasn't paid overtime.

Tongson said Tavinder Dhalla also had her wash the family's three cars on several occasions and perform heavy-duty outside work that left her hands numb.

Tongson said she was interviewed and hired by Ruby Dhalla on Feb. 22, 2008, the same day Gordo said she quit. Tongson said Ruby Dhalla gave her a test, making a noodle dish. She said the MP liked it and put Tongson on a three-week "tryout," promising to sponsor her if she worked hard during the trial period, she said.

Tongson said she was paid \$500 in cash every two weeks, plus room and board in the Dhalla home.

Ruby Dhalla, her brother and a family lawyer who responded to the *Star*'s questions deny Ruby was involved in the hiring.

According to Tongson, Ruby Dhalla demanded and took all her personal documents, including her passport, birth certificate and marriage certificate, saying she needed them to fill out the application to hire her as a live-in caregiver.

Tongson said she grew concerned as weeks passed without her documents or work authorization materializing. She turned to Intercede, the agency that helps foreign workers. Intercede called Ruby Dhalla's office in Ottawa. According to Tongson, Dhalla flew home from Ottawa the next day. Tongson said the documents were left on the kitchen counter after Tavinder Dhalla had her sign a handwritten note saying she had given the documents to Neil Dhalla, and she could have had them back at any time.

Tongson signed the letter.

Ruby Dhalla vehemently denied any mistreatment of the nannies. "I've never held on to anybody's passport," Dhalla said. "I've never raised my voice to anyone."

Gordo, who said she was owed money after she quit, claims Ruby Dhalla called and said she would pay if the nanny signed a letter saying she was well treated and properly paid. Gordo refused. Later, Gordo said she met Dhalla's mother, Tavinder, at a McDonald's and was handed \$400 cash.

In the interview, Ruby Dhalla said nannies at the home work for her family, not her.

She said she spends four days a week in Ottawa. Gordo and Tongson said Dhalla arrived at the home every Thursday and left for Ottawa on Monday. They said she occupies the biggest suite in the four-bedroom house.

Dhalla said all queries should be directed to her brother.

"The allegations being made against my family are false and baseless," Neil Dhalla said in a statement. "At no time were any passports or documentation withheld from these individuals."

Neil Dhalla said Gordo worked at the home for only 11 days and at no time had she turned over her passport to anyone in the family. "My family has been a victim of an unscrupulous agency, as well as the caregiver," he said. His lawyer added Neil is "being used as a dupe and pawn by people desperate to remain in Canada at any cost."

Both Gordo and Tongson are currently working legally for families who treat them well, they said.

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